United Nations S/2018/867

Security Council

Distr.: General
26 September 2018

Original: English

United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report provides an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) for the period from 24 May to 14 September 2018, pursuant to the mandate set out in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent Council resolutions, most recently resolution 2426 (2018).

II. Situation in the area of operations and activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was maintained, albeit in a volatile environment owing to the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, and notwithstanding a number of violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces (Disengagement of Forces Agreement) of 1974, which are described below. Following an offensive launched in late June and early July 2018 by the Syrian armed forces in south-western Syrian Arab Republic, the security situation in the UNDOF area of operations evolved rapidly, with a spike in fighting between the Syrian armed forces against non-State armed opposition groups and other armed groups, including the listed terrorist groups Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Fath al-Sham and the Nusrah Front) and the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, which have pledged allegiance to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. After heavy artillery and aerial bombardments on the Bravo side, the situation in the UNDOF area of operations changed considerably, with the Syrian Government regaining control of parts of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side that had previously been under the control of various armed groups. As underscored again by the Security Council in its resolution 2426 (2018), there should be no military activity of any kind in the area of operations.

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line that it observes. All incidents of firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing of the ceasefire line by individuals, are violations of the Agreement. In its regular interaction with both sides, the leadership of UNDOF continued to call upon both

18-15381 (E) 280918

Please recycle

parties to exercise restraint and prevent any miscalculation that might lead to an escalation of the situation. That was particularly the case when the Mission responded to incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire.

4. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed an escalation of tension between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic in the area of operations. On 27 and 28 May, United Nations personnel at observation post 53 saw Israel Defense Forces soldiers fire single shots from small arms into the area of separation.

5. On 11 July, United Nations personnel at observation post 73 observed the Israel Defense Forces fire three rockets into the area of separation in the vicinity of vacated United Nations observation post 71. On the same day, the Permanent Representative of Israel submitted a letter to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council reporting that the Israel Defense Forces had intercepted an "unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that had been launched from Syria into Israel". Unidentified individuals continued to be present at observation post 71 until 2 August, after which they were no longer seen at the post.

6. According to open sources, on 13 July the Israel Defense Forces launched a missile towards a Syrian unmanned aerial vehicle over the area of separation. On 24 July, the Israel Defense Forces reported to UNDOF that earlier that day, they had used a missile to intercept a Syrian fighter jet that had entered 2 km into Israeli airspace. That same day, the Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that a Syrian aircraft had been shot down by Israel and that the aircraft had been flying in Syrian airspace. Around the time of the reported incident, UNDOF observed burning debris falling from an aircraft, approximately 10 km south-east of observation post 54, in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF liaised with both parties to de-escalate the situation.

7. During a Syrian armed forces offensive on 30 July in south-western Syrian Arab Republic, United Nations personnel at observation post 55 observed artillery fire impact inside the area of separation close to vacated United Nations position 80A. UNDOF was not in a position to determine the point of origin of the artillery fire.

8. Transborder movements through Mount Hermon by unidentified individuals crossing between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic continued during the reporting period. On 16, 24 and 28 May, 6 and 26 June and 6 July, UNDOF observed unidentified individuals, some of them armed, with mules moving between the Bravo side and Lebanon. On 31 May, four unidentified individuals with mules approached the Hermon South position of the United Nations and requested food and water, which the UNDOF personnel were not in a position to provide. The group of individuals left the location and was later observed by UNDOF personnel firing nine single shots from small arms and 16 bursts of small arms fire at the perimeter of the Hermon South position.

9. Throughout June and July, UNDOF observed the daily crossing of the ceasefire line by unidentified individuals from the Bravo to the Alpha side. In the vicinity of observation post 54, in the southern part of the area of separation, groups of individuals from the Bravo side, ranging from 10 to 40 per day, were observed crossing the ceasefire line on foot and entering a building on the Alpha side. The Israel Defense Forces had previously informed UNDOF that a hospital located adjacent to their position in the area was providing humanitarian assistance to civilians from the Bravo side. Those groups of individuals were observed leaving the building, crossing the ceasefire line and moving back towards Mu'allaqah on the Bravo side. On 3 August, the Israel Defense Forces stated that they had begun closing and dismantling the hospital.

10. In the context of the Syrian conflict, the northern parts of the areas of separation and limitation were subjected to low levels of fighting. Sporadic exchanges of fire, which UNDOF deemed to be of low intensity, occurred between the Syrian armed forces, supported by pro-Government armed elements, against non-State armed groups. During the first two weeks of July, there was an increase in fighting in the vicinity of Jubbata al-Khashab, Turunjah and Ufaniyah, in particular between 13 and 15 July, after which the fighting subsided. On 31 July, open sources reported that the Syrian armed forces had entered the area of Jubbata al-Khashab and that arrangements had been made with local armed groups to surrender.

11. The fighting between the Syrian armed forces along with pro-Government armed elements against non-State armed groups in the central parts of the areas of separation and limitation increased to high levels of intensity during the month of July. A short period of high intensity bombardment was followed by the advance of the Syrian armed forces towards and their taking control of Tall Masharah on 17 July, Qunaytirah on 20 July and Hamadiyah al-Jadidah on 26 July. By the end of July, no kinetic activity was observed in those areas. Open sources reported that arrangements had been made with members of armed groups in Qunaytirah and Hamadiyah al-Jadidah, who chose to reconcile with the Syrian Government, and those who opted instead to relocate from the area with their families. UNDOF observed some non-State armed opposition groups decommissioning and destroying military equipment and ammunition in Qunaytirah and Hamadiyah al-Jadidah.

12. In the southern parts of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, heavy fighting was reported in July, with high-explosive rounds and bursts of heavy machine gun fire routinely heard at United Nations observation post 54 and position 80. The Syrian armed forces concentrated their initial offensive on Tall al-Harrah, Jasim, Nawa, Tasil and Tafas in the southern part of the area of limitation on the Bravo side, and, by 21 July, had gained control of those areas. By 31 July, the Syrian armed forces also had gained control of the area that had been held by the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army in the south-western part of the areas of separation and limitation.

13. UNDOF determined that, as of the beginning of August, the area of separation was under the control of the Syrian Government.

14. Throughout the reporting period, the Syrian armed forces, supported by pro-Government armed elements, maintained positions in the area of separation, in particular in the vicinity of Ba'th and Khan Arnabah, as well as along the main road connecting Qunaytirah to Damascus. On 12 occasions, UNDOF personnel observed 155-mm artillery pieces on the Bravo side within 10 km of the ceasefire line. Between 14 and 17 August, one armoured personnel carrier belonging to the Syrian armed forces was observed in the vicinity of United Nations position 85 in the southern part of the area of separation and was removed on 17 August after UNDOF protested to the Syrian authorities. During the reporting period, UNDOF also noted the occasional temporary presence of Russian military police in the area of separation.

15. The military violations on the Alpha side included the presence of 155-mm artillery pieces within 10 km of the ceasefire line. In addition, missile carriers, which are considered unauthorized military equipment in the area of limitation pursuant to the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, were observed within the 25 km zone of the area of limitation.

16. UNDOF protested to both parties all violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that it had observed, including the crossing of the ceasefire line by civilians from the Bravo side, the presence of unauthorized equipment and armed individuals in the area of separation, as well as the firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line.

17. The offensive by the Syrian armed forces in the area of limitation on the Bravo side in June and July resulted in a significant displacement of the civilian population towards the area of separation. From 26 June to 25 July, United Nations personnel observed internally displaced persons moving to locations inside the area of separation, specifically in the areas of Rafid and Burayqah, and establishing a number of camps, some of which were located close to United Nations position 80 and observation post 54. At the peak of the inflow of internally displaced persons, UNDOF observed 2,552 tents, which were housing approximately 17,055 persons. On 4, 8 and 9 July, groups of 50 to 400 internally displaced persons in the area of separation staged three protests near position 80, demanding an end to the conflict and the provision of food and water. In late July, there was a significant reduction in the number of internally displaced persons living in the area of separation. As at 17 August, UNDOF observed that there were approximately 120 internally displaced persons still living in tents located in the area of separation. Owing to the closure of the established crossing point at Qunaytirah between the Alpha and Bravo sides since late August 2014, UNDOF remained unable to facilitate humanitarian crossings between the two sides, including for students, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

18. Since its temporary relocation from a number of positions in September 2014, and pending its full return to the area of separation, UNDOF continued to maintain visibility, albeit limited, of the area of separation and the ceasefire line from its positions on Mount Hermon, Camp Faouar, position 80, in the southern part of the area of separation, and position 22, on the Alpha side. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by the military observers of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in Observer Group Golan, who have been under the operational control of UNDOF and have maintained five fixed and three temporary observation posts along the ceasefire line, as well as four temporary observation posts on Mount Hermon. The focus of Observer Group Golan has been on continuous static observation and situational awareness.

19. Through Observer Group Golan, UNDOF continued to carry out fortnightly inspections of equipment and force levels in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. Liaison officers from the Alpha side accompanied the inspection teams. Inspections in the area of limitation on the Bravo side were suspended because of the security situation and did not resume.

20. Engagement between UNDOF and the Israel Defense Forces continued, with a view to addressing restrictions on movement and access to United Nations positions in the area of separation and to reduce the delays and challenges experienced by United Nations personnel in crossing the technical fence to observation posts and positions. The Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF continued to remind the parties of their obligation to scrupulously abide by the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the ground, and to extend all cooperation to UNDOF in the fulfilment of the tasks under its mandate.

21. UNDOF, in consultation with both parties, continued to review the situation in the area of separation in order to assess whether the conditions on the ground would permit the return to vacated positions in the area of separation. UNDOF conducted assessment visits and continuously monitored the prevailing security situation.

22. Since the resumption of patrolling on the Bravo side in February 2018, the UNDOF mechanized infantry company has conducted in excess of 50 protected patrols on the four designated routes in the northern and central parts of the areas of separation and limitation. It is envisaged that UNDOF will include protected patrols to observation posts 71 and 72 and to position 32 in the near future.

23. On 2 and 9 August, UNDOF conducted reconnaissance patrols to the Bravo gate in the area of separation. The purpose of those patrols was to ascertain the state of the Bravo and Charlie gates, and to specifically assess the condition of the structures at the Charlie gate, with a view to commencing the necessary reconstruction. UNDOF found that the structures at the Charlie gate had been damaged, and that the entire area around the gate required clearance of possible mines, unexploded ordnance and explosive remnants of war. UNDOF also determined that main supply road 7 from Camp Faouar to the Bravo gate was in sufficiently good condition for future use by UNDOF vehicles, in particular heavy vehicles.

24. During the reporting period, UNDOF made progress towards the limited return to Bravo side operations, in line with the phased UNDOF plan (see S/2018/550). Pursuant to phase 2 of the plan, UNDOF continued to develop the infrastructure of and improve the living conditions at Camp Faouar. UNDOF has continuously rehearsed exercises to ensure the security and defence of the Camp, and all deployed elements have been integrated into a cohesive and effective component, with clear command and control mechanisms.

25. Phase 2 of the UNDOF plan also includes the refurbishment of facilities and the security infrastructure of selected observation posts in the northern part of the area of separation, with a view to reoccupying observation posts 56, 71 and 72 in phase 3 of the incremental return to the Bravo side operations, conditions permitting. UNDOF continued to assess the security situation in the southern part of the area of separation and to ascertain the capabilities that would be appropriate for deployment in that area, conditions permitting. Observer Group Golan will not be deployed at observation posts in the area of separation on a permanent basis until such time as the security conditions permit, when adequate accommodation and appropriate force protection measures are in place.

26. The UNDOF Force Reserve Company commenced its phased re-deployment from the Alpha side to the Bravo side on 13 August, with the final group completing the move on 4 September. The UNDOF quick reaction force on the Alpha side achieved full operational capability on 6 August.

27. In accordance with the provisions of Council resolution 2426 (2018) and the UNDOF operational concept, UNDOF continued its efforts to deploy appropriate technology to ensure the safety and security of UNDOF personnel and equipment. A surveillance trailer remained deployed on the Alpha side at Camp Ziouani and position 22, while another was maintained at Camp Faouar. In addition, between 8 and 24 July, UNDOF deployed a surveillance trailer to position 80.

28. UNDOF continued to resupply its positions on Mount Hermon and at Camp Faouar from Damascus. UNDOF convoys between Damascus and the United Nations positions were conducted almost daily, using main supply route 7 and Salam highway, with an UNDOF security escort and accompanied by a liaison officer from the office of the Senior Syrian Arab Delegate. UNDOF continuously monitored the situation and took the necessary precautionary measures in planning and conducting its convoys. UNDOF continued to conduct and update its contingency planning for the reinforcement and evacuation of United Nations positions and observation posts on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, as well as in Damascus. UNDOF conducted regular rehearsals, exercises and training for identified contingencies. Risk mitigation measures, including force protection measures, continued to be developed at observation posts, positions and operational bases at Camp Ziouani and Camp Faouar.

29. As at 17 August 2018, UNDOF comprised 975 troops, including 38 women. Troops were deployed from Bhutan (3), Czechia (2), Ghana (12), Fiji (305), India (192), Ireland (136), Nepal (323) and the Netherlands (2). In addition, 70 military

observers from UNTSO Observer Group Golan, including 8 women, assisted UNDOF in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council Resolution 338 (1973)

30. In its resolution 2426 (2018), the Security Council called upon the parties concerned to immediately implement its resolution 338 (1973). It decided to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a period of six months, until 31 December 2018, and requested the Secretary-General to report every 90 days on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement resolution 338 (1973). The search for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), was addressed in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/73/322), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 72/15 on Jerusalem and 72/16 on the Syrian Golan.

31. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict further reduces the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

32. I am deeply concerned by the military activity that occurred in the UNDOF area of operations during the reporting period. The heavy artillery and aerial bombardment on the Bravo side that spiked in July, along with the firing of missiles and rockets from the Alpha side into the area of separation on 3, 13 and 24 July, have jeopardized the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. I urge the parties to exercise maximum restraint at all times. I encourage the members of the Security Council to support efforts to sensitize both parties and regional stakeholders to the risks of escalation and the need to preserve the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.

33. It remains critical that the parties maintain their liaison with UNDOF to prevent any escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line. All violations of the ceasefire line increase tensions between the signatories to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and undermine progress towards stability in the area.

34. I note the cessation of military activity of the Syrian armed forces and armed groups, and between various armed groups, including listed terrorist groups, in the UNDOF area of operations. Noting the continued presence of the Syrian armed forces in the area of separation, I reiterate that there should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. I urge all parties to the Syrian conflict to cease military actions throughout the country and to remove all military equipment and personnel from the area of separation.

35. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing across the ceasefire line. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on the Alpha side is of concern.

36. As UNDOF continues to consolidate its presence at Camp Faouar and maintains its efforts to intensify its operations in the area of separation, it remains critical that the safety and security of United Nations personnel be assured. The circumstances under which the troops and military observers are operating continue to require

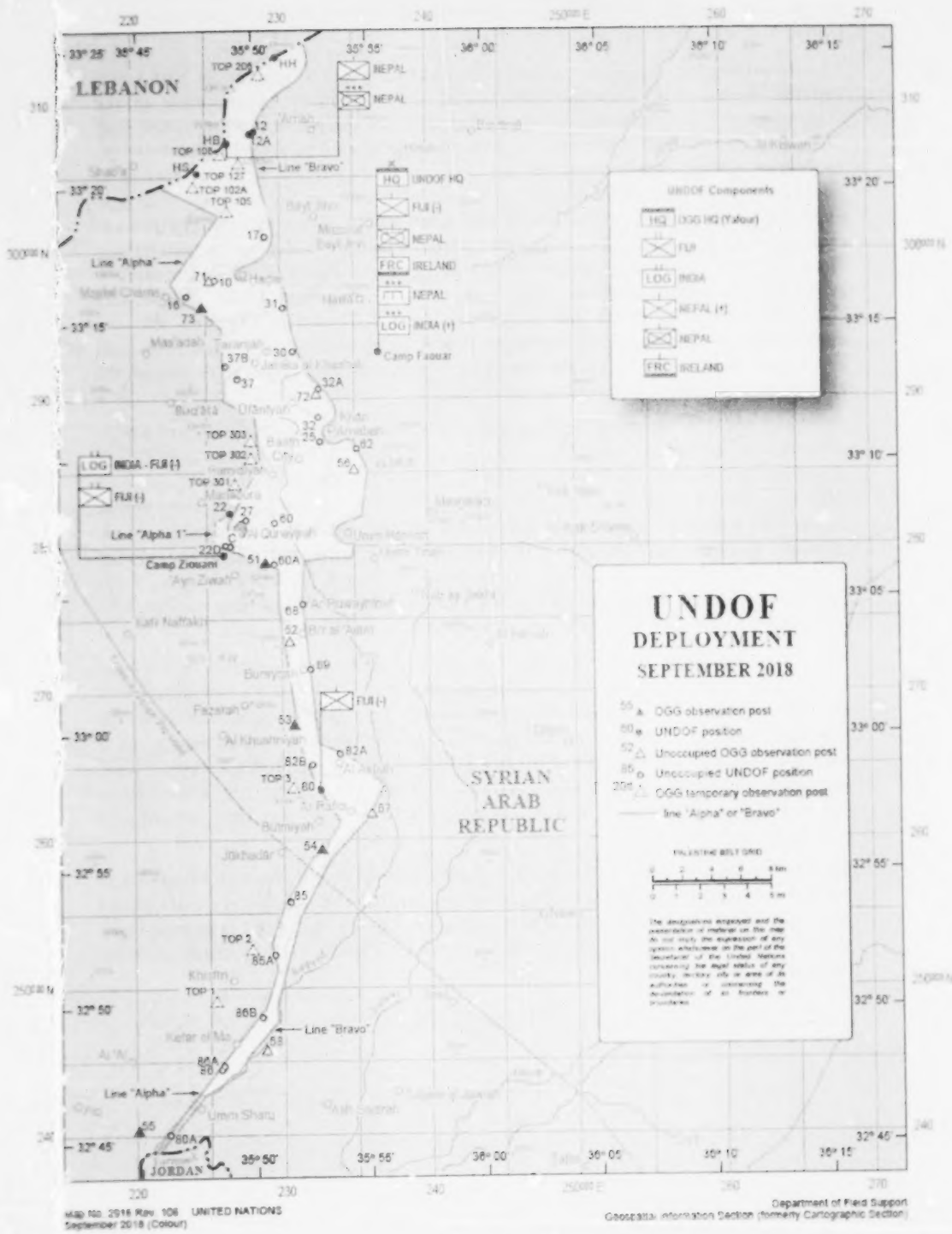
vigilance and risk mitigation measures. I renew my call upon the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to fulfil its primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the Bravo side.

37. In calling for a return to vacated positions in the area of separation, both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the presence of UNDOF. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the Mission, conditions permitting. I count on the continued cooperation of both parties to facilitate the advancement of the Mission's plans for an incremental return to operations and positions in the area of separation and to ensure that the Mission can implement its mandate. It is critical that UNDOF be able to deploy the technology and equipment necessary to enhance its observation of the area of separation and the ceasefire line and to augment force protection. In that regard, the support and cooperation of both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic in ensuring that the deployment of the necessary technology and equipment occurs seamlessly and expeditiously are essential. At the same time, the parties must continue to support the enhancement of the liaison function of UNDOF.

38. It is equally important that the Security Council continue to bring to bear its influence on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner and is allowed to operate freely in accordance with the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. The reopening of the regular Qunaytirah crossing point would benefit the ability of UNDOF to implement its mandate. The support of the parties in facilitating the clearance of mines, unexploded ordnance and remnants of war at the crossing is crucial. It is also necessary for UNDOF to continue to have at its disposal all means and resources necessary for it to return fully to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

39. The confidence and commitment of troop-contributing countries in UNDOF remain key factors in the Mission's ability to carry out its mandate. I continue to count on the support of troop-contributing countries as UNDOF proceeds with the implementation of its agreed plan to increase operations in the area of separation. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Ghana, India, Ireland, Nepal and the Netherlands for their contributions, commitment, resolve and consummate professionalism. I am also thankful to the Member States that have contributed military observers to UNTSO.

40. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Francis Vib-Sanziri, and the military and civilian personnel serving under his leadership, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment under challenging circumstances.


LEBANON
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
JORDAN
NEPAL
FIJI (-)
IRELAND
INDIA (+)
Camp Faouar
Line "Alpha"
Line "Alpha 1"
Line "Bravo"
Camp Ziouani
UNDOF Components
UNDOF
DEPLOYMENT
SEPTEMBER 2018
OGG observation post
UNDOF position
Unoccupied OGG observation post
Unoccupied UNDOF position
OGG temporary observation post
line "Alpha" or "Bravo"
Map No. 2916 Rev. 106 UNITED NATIONS
September 2018 (Colour)
Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)